

## The Forest of Enchantments: A Retold Saga in Mythopoesis

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### Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the starring gem in South Asian Diasporic fiction, has evoked the essential goodness of human heart through the pathetic journey of exile and forced migration. But apart from her genius in Diasporic literature, she has also raised voices for those epic heroines who never got a chance to demand for their individuality in the original epic. To make us realise their importance, she has administered magical realism along with the crudity of pragmatism and heart-rending naturalism and purposefully woven the magical world through her imaginative narration and lucidity of incorporating an alternated reality full of charm and captivating allurements. Her creative forte represents a daring contradiction between the sensory and the illusory ways and worlds of experience engaging her literary personages supported by a harmonious coexistence of 'magical fantasy' by making the humdrum wondrous and the factually spectacular. Through the character of Sita, the emblem of ceaseless suffering, Divakaruni has tried to offer a tribute to this legendary soul, where she not only protests against her unlawful desertion, but also points to the troublesome sufferings of other benign victims like Kaushalya, Sumitra, Urmila, Sarama, Mandodari and Ahalya.

**Keywords:** Myth, Patriarchy, Psychoanalysis, Re-telling, victimization etc.

### Introduction:

Myths are mostly glorious stories of the ancient past that solicit embalmed euphoria from mundane despondency. They depict a genre of unmitigated despair, inerrant sordidness and realistic descriptions of the everyday affair with non-realistic figurative use. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Myth is a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon"; whereas Cambridge Dictionary terms it as, "An ancient story or set of stories, especially explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts"; in an essay, "The Myths and Realities of Teaching Vocational Subjects in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria" (2011), Otuaga, defines 'myth' as:

*According to the Greek mythos, myth means story or word. Mythology is the study of myth. As stories (or narratives), myths articulate how characters undergo or enact an ordered sequence of events. The term myth has come to refer to a certain genre (or category) of stories that share characteristics that make this genre distinctly different from other genres of oral narratives, such as legends and folktales. Many definitions of myth repeat similar general aspects of the genre and may be summarized thus: Myths are symbolic tales of the distant past (often primordial times) that concern*

*cosmogony and cosmology (the origin and nature of the universe), may be connected to belief systems or rituals, and may serve to direct social action and values. (Otuaga, 87)*

Thus, basically, myth denotes a person of some significance in his idealised deeds, primarily by narrating an old event with magnificent fascination; the writer analogises the mythical tale connotatively to distinguish some celebrated act, dialogues, or collective beliefs and makes a fusion of natural and supernatural euphoria. Therefore, the relationship between myth and literature is a speculative one; and we cannot negate the influences of *The Bible*, *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* and other mono-myths as well as polyphonic mythical narratives reverberating in the human psyche and their significance in forming the system of culture, appropriating the balance in society and holding idealism against provocative allurements. But it is noteworthy to declare that the epics, primarily *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the very bases of Indian wisdom, are transparently male-centric. The females are presented there as mere counterparts of their male suitors, and in most of the cases, they are blamed for being the very reason for gigantic battles:

“. . . mythology is by and large a man’s mythology, describing a world from a man’s point of view. Women are seldom considered in isolation from men and seldom have scope for action on their own initiative” (Dowden, 161). While men stood to maintain balance and revive past grandeur, women were portrayed negatively as trouble makers, temptresses, or foolish sentimental beings. In whatever form they are represented, be as Eve, Penelope, Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari or Helen; everywhere they are treated as the weaker ‘other’ who needed the masculine protective ring to save their honour. Paula Caplan too, in her book, *The Myth of Women’s Masochism*, has suggested how the women should break this stereotyped fixity by breaking the primordial image of women’s masochism:

*This is a common pattern for women: blaming themselves rather than other people . . . because that is the ‘feminine’ thing to do . . . Like the concept of original sin, the concept of woman’s innate masochism limits the definition of who we are and what we can become and makes us feel ashamed and self-blaming. Only by understanding how the myth grew and what perpetuates it now, only by learning to recognise the numerous forms it takes in our lives, can we demolish the myth and open wide the possibilities for women freely to be and to do what they want . . . To protect ourselves and others from destructive self-blame and unnecessary acceptance of a harmful status quo, we need to recognise the various guises the myth takes in our society. (Caplan, 6)*

A new-historicist as well as postmodern mythopoeic analysis, therefore, is a must to inspect the traditional texts with a contemporary outlook and provide new meanings to their muted suffering. Fictional writing, too, generally follows the gender-biased female subjugation mediating through language and imagination endorsing patriarchal supremacy in the normative pattern of socio-cultural prescriptions. The stereotyped representation of Sita or Savitri for their unidirectional devotion to their husbands have already been questioned, which used to be a recurrent theme in many fictional as well as non-fictional narratives; and the modern revisionist mythological writers like Mahasweta Devi, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande and Chitra Divakaruni apply the archetypal images of ‘Sita’ and ‘Draupadi’ to portray their unsung sufferings, the way they were deprived, neglected and disgraced by their husbands and beloved subjects by rewriting their stories to develop scopes for holistic development and felicitate equal justice for their recompense. There are some other writers

also, who preferred myths obsessively as their content matters, such as R. K. Narayan's *The Man Eater of Malgudi* (1961) is based upon the renowned mythological episode of Mohini and Bhasmasura, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) frames a mythic network of the *Mahabharata* to offer insightful profundity to a contemporary story, Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1982) employs the tragic love story of Ram and Sita, Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) is a satire of *Mahabharata* and *Arabian Nights*, Anjana Appachana's *Listening Now* (1998) is a fascinating re-fabrication of the hapless tale of Shakuntala; and Kavita Kane's all six domineering novels like *Karna's Wife* (2014), *Sita's Sister* (2014), *Menaka's Choice* (2015), *Lanka's Princess* (2017), *Fisher Queen's Destiny* (2017) and *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) reanalyse respectively the pathos of Uruvi, Urmila, Menaka, Surpanakha, Satyawati and Ahalya; suffused in the myths of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as shadowy figures, brought onto the forefront keeping with the parity of contemporary socio-political tenets; to name only a few among plenty.

### Discussion:

With time and evolution, myths and their archetypal symbolism have altered to a considerable extent. Primordial myths were singular, unidirectional; they specified certain norms and fixities which have lost their vigour and vibrancy in today's scenario. We cannot but accept that women's mythical significances as the pure, virgin, virtuous and loyal are fixated into our psyche where any other manifestation of that fair sex is hard to accept. Not only that, myth stands for that traditional rigidity, which is obsolete and incompetent as a parameter of modern judgemental prerequisites. So, a change in perception or re-modifying those old narratives from a feminine perspective is inevitable. *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* narrates 'retelling' as an, 'activity to tell a story again, often in a different way' (p. 1307). Therefore, retelling involves reinterpreting or reanalysing the socio-political, racial, ethnic and anthropocentric worldview to find newer meanings into the contemporary panorama of commonly unequivocal perception. Therefore, the retelling of myth can be seen as a reinterpretation, reconstruction and reassertion of reiterating the older expressions with renewed affirmation based on the co-text and contextual resonances. Thus, though the story remains the same, the envisioning of the old characters with a moderate insight, socio-political complexity, the articulation of polyvocal dialogism, and an aversion for the universal generalisation represent the retold account with genuine authenticity. Thus, many writers have emulated this phenomenal novelty like Girish Karnad, Amish Tripathy, Kavita Kane, Anita Nair, Devdutt Pattanaik, Mahasweta Devi and our very own Chitra Banerjee, and with their incorporation of new incidences they have questioned the stereotyped fixities ambivalent in our primordial epics. They have compared, contrasted, analysed and experimented with this new genre and spectacularly sheltered other writers suffering from the inadequacy of plot, thematic intrigues and insipid narrations. We can cite numerous specimens of retold narratives beginning from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1392), *Legends of Good Women* (1380), Homer's *Iliad* (762 B.C.) and *Odyssey* (8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.), Shakespeare's historical and Roman plays like *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), *Henry V* (1599), *King John* (1594-96), *Richard III* (1593), etc.; all of which are refashioned from the prevalent oral form of un-chronicled history; and another very particular text we may mention that was based on Biblical narratives is Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667); where he justified the ways of God to man by portraying Satan, a rebellious hero. Myths are instinctively related to mythology, folktales, religion

and other forms of symbolist locales. Rajagopalachari has rightly observed that, “Mythology is an integral part of religion. It is as necessary for religion and national culture as the skin and skeleton that preserves a fruit with its juice and taste” (Rajagopalachari, xx). Commenting on the essential nature of myth, Edward Quinn writes that myths are nothing but, “. . . stories belonging to a specific culture recounting supernatural or paradoxical events designed to reflect that culture’s view of the world. Despite their seemingly endless variety; myths tend to have an underlying consistency of action, theme, and character” (Quinn, 207). Nevertheless, in folktales, Puranas and folklores, legendary heroes containing supernatural heroism differentiate themselves from myths’ subtle nuances. M. H. Abrams classifies folktales much dissimilar than the myth. He says, “If the hereditary story concerns supernatural beings who are not god and the story is not a part of systematic mythology it is usually classified as folktale” (Abrams, 170). Whereas Edward Quinn believes that folktale is, “A story handed down orally from generation to generation that becomes part of the tradition of a group of people. The oral transmission allows for continuous development and alteration of the story. Once a folktale assumes a written form, it remains a folktale, but its form becomes fixed” (Quinn, 169). But it is an impossible task to differentiate the mechanism of mythology from folklore machinations; the two are just reverse sides of the same coins. Myths often have some solemn purpose underlying the narration, while Folktales play on everyday fears and cravings for introducing fantastic adventures and ingenious contemplative urges. Among the other myth critics, we can hold the view of Northrop Frye, who says:

*By myth . . . I mean primarily a certain type of story. It is a story in which some of the chief characters are gods or rather beings larger in power than humanity . . . hence, like the folktale it is an abstract story pattern. The characters can do what they like, which means what the story-teller likes, there is no need to be plausible or logical in motivation. (Frye, 597)*

Thus, we can reasonably correspond to the contemplation of Rajagopalachari that literary creations need the admixture of realism as well as supernaturalism, myth and magic, legends as well as folktale to make history more appealing and deep-rooted in our psyche:

*. . . particularly to young men in schools and colleges to read these books. There is not a page in them but after reading you will emerge with greater courage, stronger will and purer mind . . . they are the records of the mind and spirits of our forefathers who cared for the good, ever so much than for the pleasant and who saw more of the mystery of life than we can do in our interminable pursuit for petty and illusory achievements in the material plane. We should be thankful of those who preserved for us these many centuries old epics in spite all the vicissitudes through which our nation passed since Vyasa’s and Valmiki’s time . . . (Rajagopalachari, xix).*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, with her incessant style and lucid story-telling expertise, has resorted to mythical and magical analogies in many of her fictional tales. On the one hand, she has delineated the fabulous journey of the female folk from innocence to experience amidst odious ramifications of ignominy and hackneyed passivity, while on the other; she has specified the unbound continuity of life substantiating instability, vulnerability and uncertainty with an optimum aspiration for bliss and ecstasy. She herself has traversed the two antithetical polarities of India and America, and as a by-product of this Diasporic demarcation, she has endeavoured to dip her pen into the miseries of Diasporic inefficacy with a subtle enumeration of myth and magic

and an exceptional delicacy of surreal narratives. The earliest female incarnation in Hindu-mythology is the invincible spirit of 'Shakti', the positive energy which can obliterate or diminish any negative vibe with intense sagacity and recuperate the natural poise. But since ages, the patriarchal society has undermined females into domestic control by positing residual hazards along with childbearing with bitter inhuman apathy. Nandini Bhadra, in her essay "Emerging Relationships in Diasporic Locations: An Examination of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fictions", has spoken about this positive energy recurring in the form of goddess Durga, Kali or Shakti:

*In Hindu mythology, the goddess Durga is represented as the abode of 'shakti', a Sanskrit word which means inner strength and power and Kali symbolises the dark aspect of feminine power. The goddess is benevolent and malevolent at different times, depending on the need for protection, sustenance and destruction of evil. Indian Hindu women have been brought up not only to worship these icons, but also to internalize part of this 'Shakti'. Perhaps Divakaruni seems to suggest that that the Indian woman in the diaspora is fortunate to have come from an ancient culture and can use her own resources, her inner shakti to make a place for herself in the new country she inhabits. (Bhadra, 295)*

Therefore, Divakaruni has made way for demanding universal selfhood transcending their narrow liminality of personal distress, physical abuse or societal disrespect. She has brought the immigrant females under a unitary refuge called MAITRI and de-motivated cultural denunciation, female exploitation and sexual perversity administering magical touches of celestial rarity. From Tilo to Draupadi, from Rakhi to Sita, she has delineated the everyday natural characters with a veneer of magic-realism, whereas the mythic heroines are seen to narrate their unfathomed distress with fervent subjectivity and keen languishment. She has emphasised that:

*A writer should push boundaries, and I wanted to try something new, take risks . . . all the risk taking involves bridging barriers, doing away with boundaries: not only boundaries between life and death, the everyday world and the mythic one but with the thought that perhaps the boundaries we created in our lives are not real. I am talking about the boundaries that separate communities and people. (Morton Marcus, "The Spice of Life")*

The magical mode of her realistic representation defamiliarises the mundane, where the exotic meets a natural reciprocation. Her self-perturbation in a lonely American setting entices her to make immigration a platform to relinquish melancholia, nostalgia and the feeling of nothingness, gradually maturing her characters to face the society with dauntless conviction. She deconstructs the eponymous myths which dehumanise women, and, at the same time, idolises the natural efficacies of Mrs. Gupta or Tilottoma by portraying them larger than lives. The vocalisation of the miseries of Panchaali, Sita, Urmila, or Ahalya de-legitimise the culture of silence, and they negate the protracted boundaries by deliberate voicing, visioning and questioning the enigma of life they are thrown into by patriarchal democrats.

*The Palace of Illusions* (2008), which was Divakaruni's first attempt into the mythopoesis of the accepted myth of *Mahabharata*, has very obviously incited readers with an expectation of creating something new with another epoch-making mythical narrative of *Ramayana*. But technically speaking, *Ramayana* is much older than *Mahabharata* and contains lesser complexities. As its name suggests, it derives its origin from 'Ram'+ 'Ayana' meaning the path or the journey ventured by

Ram. It was composed in Treta Yuga, contains 24,000 slokas contended into seven Kandas, and shows us the idealism of a king, the dutifulness of a queen, devotedness towards parents, fraternal loyalty and the destruction of evil at the end of much turmoil. So, the task was not an easy one for Chitra Banerjee to recreate this idealistic myth into contemporary critical purview; it took almost eleven years to produce this text altogether different from migratory oscillations, where we could almost envision the mythical Ayodhya along with its kings and queens, bringing out those otherwise obligated stories with unfathomed criticality. Her work is more often called *Sitayana*, the journey of Sita from her supernatural birth to the ultimate denunciation into the mother earth. Therefore, it is a tale of feminist resistance where none of the major incidents was altered; yet we get a completely otherwise scenario which we perhaps never notice with a second thought. We can very well support Amitav Ghosh, who believed that this tale is, “One of the most strikingly lyrical voices writing about the lives of Indian women” (Cited on the cover page). Thus, though written on a mythical perspective, the novel crosses the boundaries of a mere genre of mythopoesis by making it artistry of time-immemorial, for all classes and statuses of common beings.

Unlike the mythical narrative, she has represented a very humanitarian image of Sita, a woman devoted to her husband as well as her followers, a passionate admirer of nature, a considerate mother, and also a banished wife who questions the injustices thrown upon her fate. Divakaruni has admitted that she was never satisfied with the destinies these mythical females had been born with. Like Panchaali, she has made her own version of Sita, with her tale of victories and defeats, contentment and depravations. She studies various versions of *Ramayana*, like *Valmiki Ramayan*, *Adbhuta Ramayan*, the *Kamba Ramayan*, and finally, the *Bengali Krittibasi Ramayan* from the fifteenth century. She confesses that: “I discovered folk songs about Sita, or those addressed to her. I realised that there were many portraits of her, each different in a significant way. It gave me the courage to write my own version” (*FE*, viii). She has followed three important patterns to transpire her imagination into word-pictures; first being that as Ram was the incarnation of Vishnu, Sita was also the incarnation of Lakshmi; but unlike Ram, she had to suffer more as a human being, and if we worship Ram as the ideal husband who did not marry twice for his immense love to Sita, then how could he banish her without any fault of her own? Secondly, though Sita is considered to be an emblem of meekness, enduring all suffering for her extreme love and devotion for her own people, in the end, she demonstrates the courage of not compromising to the male patriarchs, which have been a common act of desperation of the Indian females. And thirdly, she knew that the love story of Ram and Sita is one of the most tragic stories of unfulfilment, unrequited passion and desire, so elevating Sita by undermining the status of Ram would have been too simplistic a conclusion for that colossal epic. Therefore, she depicted the compulsions and responsibilities of Ram, and obviously, in doing so, she has explored the exciting and surprising layers of Sita’s character with genuine solemnity.

We all know she was earth-born, naturally capable of healing head-ache and cold, infections and menstrual irregularities with the curative properties of plants and herbs. As an expert in martial arts, she never believed in the mysterious presence of Rakshas and secretly harboured the desire of visiting a forest and cross an ocean with a terrified as well as exciting longing. But surprisingly, there was no ocean with big, bountiful waves near Mithila; yet her dreams used to disturb her frequently perplexing about her origin as well as her real parentage. Her sister Urmila was altogether different by nature as well as in her fondness for jewellery and extravagant dresses; but her mother sensed that

her life might be much problematic than other princesses and therefore some women came every day to teach her, “How the body itself could become a weapon, and how the opponent’s body—its weight, its awkwardness, its ignorance of your strategy—could be used against him” (Divakaruni, 10). She also learned to move like a panther, run and climb in silence, and accept pain with resignation. The mother was satisfied with her training and was quite relieved to realise that though “girlhood was ephemeral as a drop of water on a lily pad” (Divakaruni, 10), and Sita would soon leave them all after her marriage; she would manage well with adverse challenges by fulfilling the preconditions needed for the struggle.

Before Ram came to Mithila to try his fortune, one hundred and sixteen suitors have already tried and were defeated in their attempts. To break the divine bow of Lord Shiva was the challenge for that prospective match. Like Panchaali, she was also prophesied by the priest, “You’ll get what you want, but it will not be what you expect. Success, in the beginning, will be followed by a thorny path . . . There may be joy. But equally, there may be disaster. And in between, heartbreak” (Divakaruni, 19). The prologue is very intriguing; Valmiki, who has written *Ramayana* elaborating the grandeur and valour of Ram, offered his first manuscript to Sita. But Sita finds that though, ‘the poetry is superb, the descriptions, sublime, the rhythm perfect’ (Divakaruni, 02), it captures none of her sufferings at Lanka, in darkness, amid the harrowing presence of Rakshasas. Valmiki, in his endeavour to eulogise Ram, has altogether missed the desire and the despair of Sita, who announces bitterly, “For you haven’t understood a woman’s life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another” (Divakaruni, 2). Then, the old sage advises her that she should write her own story because he has only incorporated those details divinely enlightened to him; but the dark debris of the women’s hearts need to be illuminated by their own will, self-esteem and determination. As she dipped her quill into the ink, not only her past memories of sorrow and rarest pleasures rose before her eyes; but there were other voices too: the voice of Kaikeyi whose sole desire was to make her son Bharat as the next inheritor after Dashrath; Ahalya who was turned into stone by her own husband though Lord Indra committed the treachery; Surpanakha who was utterly insulted for desiring the wrong man; Mandodari, the queen of Ravan, who suffered through her whole life because her husband’s obsession with another woman; and last but not least; her own sister Urmila whom Lakshman wrongly left behind for following his brother to the forest. They seemed to implore her for letting their suffering be acknowledged too: “*Write our story too. For always we’ve been pushed into corners, trivialised, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten—or maligned and used as cautionary tales*” (Divakaruni, 04). Sita, too, knew that her story would have been implausible without their narratives; and she started writing *Sitayana*, the debut exposition of her expectation and heartbreak; her despondency and her solitude as a rejected wife as well as a single mother of twin sons.

In the next chapters, Sita has been delineated as the archetype of common females who enjoy the first half of their lives at their fathers’ places; then after marriage follow their husbands at their marital homes and try to adopt their culture; and finally depend on their children for livelihood and subsistence. Sita, too, had enjoyed her early life under the protective care of King Janak; then, after her marriage, followed Ram to Ayodhya and did her best to adjust to that unknown household. Even as a devoted wife, she had chosen the path of misery and peril amidst the roughness of forests,

suffered several humiliations in Lanka, and finally, her disgusted self chose to resort into the bosom of mother earth. But the simplicity of this description would never suffice the suffering and sacrifices she was prone to, Sita who is esteemed to be the emblem of purity and virtuosity, was wilfully banished by her own husband influenced by some biased inferences, and Divakaruni makes her Sita question this *MaryadaPurushottam*; who for his aim of becoming an ideal emperor, never could succumb to be an appropriate husband. Rather, he proved to be an impoverished coward, a merciless spouse who banished his pregnant wife based on some inessential whims.

Divakaruni's artistry on the genre of mythopoesis lies in the fact she made Ravan, the famed demon king, hated and feared by all, to try for the hand of Sita; while at the end, according to the *Kamba Ramayan*, she obliquely hinted him as the biological father of Sita who was thrown away for the miraculous oracle that she would beget the nemesis of her own father. Thus, these two contradictory stands point to the very 'Negative Oedipus Complex' or the Electra complex propounded by Freud in his analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. But later, Ravan had realised that Sita was the incarnation of Lakshmi and died with profound bliss.

The *Haradhanu* or the Shiva's bow is another area where she has shown her mastery. It was brought to King Janak by Parashuram, who instructed that according to the divine design, who could break that bow, would be the appropriate mate for Sita's marriage. Ravan, who was also a devotee of Shiva, could not make it move. Sita was barely nine when she had first seen this bow; it had a magical quality. It used to converse with her about certain mysterious things she never knew or imagined; by sitting in front of it, keeping her eyes closed, she could find herself in a horrid place; imprisoned in a dark dungeon or buried on the sand sinking further down or locked in a cave witnessing a raging fire assuaging near her. The challenge was to sit calm and quiet and devise the best strategy to deal with those adversities. Obviously, there was no escape, and all she needed was to gather mental strength for endurance. The bow also indicated that she was no ordinary person, but one with a complicated destiny, and her sacrifice would save the world. It also said that she was a goddess, but she needed to realise her own self. These ambiguities seemed to baffle her, but it did not reveal further. It also told her that both she and Ravan were trapped in their human bodies, and she was connected to both Ram and Ravan since before the ages of men. While he was ensnared in the human body because of a curse, Sita had chosen this earthly existence out of love for Ram, and she would cause about, 'the final battle of TretaYug between the forces of light and darkness' (Divakaruni, 29). With this intriguing ambivalence, she saw the dream of a golden deer, a flash of gleaming gold. She demanded the deer despite Ram's cautionary advice, and she woke up with a deep sorrow remembering Ram going out to capture the golden deer, which metaphorically ended their rhapsodic rupture. In another dream, she saw she was rushing through the air, her hair streaming behind her, tears blazing like a meteor's tail, she was throwing her ornaments below and cursing some evil spirit: "*Hear my curse, trickster. You and your evil lineage will fall to perdition for this. Your land will turn to ash*" (Divakaruni, 41). Thus, all her visions were suggestive of those future dooms she would definitely stumble upon, and thus, they prepared the readers as well as Sita herself for the vague destiny she would have to confront by all possible means. Therein lays the masterstroke of our novelist.

Divakaruni thus basically adds a feather to the greatest accomplishment of Sage Valmiki, eyeing analytically the deprivation of its central female character despite any explicit clauses. Her relentless



love and duty towards her husband and her children have accurately been maintained by Divakaruni with deft ingenuity. But her Sita is not muted or voiceless; while breaking the Siva's bow, Ram refuses to marry her as he has decided that all four brothers will be marrying in the same family as well at the same time; which seemed to be impossible to the entire family; and Sita speaks with solemn determination: "Your desire to avoid conflict among brothers is a good one, Prince of Ayodhya, but perhaps you should have informed us of this vow before you strung Shiva's bow? Surely you knew that once her bride-price is paid, a woman can't marry anyone else?" (Divakaruni, 36) She herself gets astonished by the rigidity of her voice and feels that some goddess is rebelling against those set norms: "It's important to speak your mind to the man you are going to marry. What kind of relationship would you have if you couldn't do that?" (Divakaruni, 36) Even when she finds an easy solution by offering Urmila and two other cousins Mandavi and Shrutakirti, as suitable matches for Ram's younger brothers, there was a frown of surprise on his face that how a mere girl could 'untangle such a knotty situation' (Divakaruni, 37). After her marriage, she promised to protect the people of Ayodhya and bring prosperity even at the cost of sacrificing her own life and happiness. She felt entrapped by the complexity in the three queens of Dashrath; Kaushalya being the eldest, never got much value from the king, the youngest one, Sumitra too, faced the same condition, while the entire household used to run after the wishes of Kaikeyi. Kaikeyi did not approve of her as the queen of Ram. She even challenged her in a duel, though Sita's martial art has made her accept defeat. After losing to Sita, she started revaluing her worth and gifted her with a beautiful gold and pearl necklace from Kekaya, her paternal home. She sighed that though she missed her home, but the king did not allow her to go there: "Such is the life of a queen, filled with compromise. You'll know it soon enough" (Divakaruni, 83).

Ram, as a ruler, never compromised with the well being of his subjects. His yearning for becoming an ideal king ruling over an ideal kingdom pulsed within his heart. He felt every person under his rule should have a voice, his concerns should be acknowledged, and he would be given justice under all circumstances. But he remained silent about females. Just before the eve of Ram's coronation, Sita had a dream where the quick-witted Kaikeyi managed to extricate two boons of her own choice as previously promised; first being the banishment of Ram for fourteen years and second being the crowning of Bharat, her son, as the legitimate inheritor of Ayodhya. Ram obliged quietly, though blood rushed through Sita's veins, who urges Ram to, '*protest. If nothing else, remind your father of his kingly duty to the people of Ayodhya*' (Divakaruni, 105). But Ram never raised his voice with spiteful audacity; rather, he quietened her with placidity. Sita too firmly declared that whatever danger might befall; she would surely accompany her husband in the forest. She wanted to say, '*not all women are weak and helpless like you think*' (Divakaruni, 111), but she had learned to choose words before saying and utters that carefully, ". . . my foremost duty as your faithful spouse was to follow you, even to the end of the earth? To be with you in riches and poverty? To take care of you the best I can? Isn't that what you just told your mother to do for her husband? You can't deprive me of my wifely right" (Divakaruni, 112). Duty and righteousness were two inseparable words for Ram; he easily complied, and after that, started their future journey into the rough uncertainties of an unforeseen future. The forest life was not poetic at all; when they started facing the inconveniences like, bathing in the cold streams in which slimy creatures lurked instead of the warm water the palace, wearing the same mud crusted sari every day instead of the freshly laundered clothes; or sleeping on the heaps of leaves instead of softy beds with insects whining round and sucking their

blood day and night; she realised very well that their journey would be tougher than her expectation. Yet, they were content with the meagre supplements life offered them for sustenance.

There are numerous examples where not only Sita felt irrelevant or inessential in the world of her husband; but Urmila also felt the same when Lakshman refused to take her with him; he merely said that in that dangerous life, he would be unable to take care of unnecessary problems; Sita too had to leave her behind because she could not leave Ram combat with his difficulties alone amidst such unusual perils. She asked forgiveness for this inequitable resolution: “Forgive me Sister, I said silently, you who are the unsung heroine of this tale, the one who has the tougher role: to wait and to worry” (Divakaruni, 117). Sita’s narrative of the pathetic state of Ahalya too incites human compassion. Ahalya, who was created by Brahma and considered the most exquisite beauty on earth, gave herself to sage Gautam. But Lord Indra could not tolerate that such a fascinating beauty should be offered to an ascetic. He approached Ahalya and violated her modesty in the disguise of her husband while Gautam was busy in a yajna. Later, when he arrived, he sensed the whole thing, and out of rage, he cursed Indra of having a thousand vulvas all over his body; and later, with a repeated appeal of his wife Sachi, the vulvas were changed into eyes. But, Ahalya was completely innocent; it was the nasty ploy of Indra for which the unfortunate incident happened to her. But Gautam never understood her ingenuousness and cursed her for betraying the marital vows for the sake of bodily pleasure. She was turned into stone, and it was Ram who, with his miraculous touches has brought her back to life. But after that incident, she fully stopped conversing with people. Gautam said that she had made a vow of silence for enriching herself with spiritual merit, but Sita could feel her muted protest behind her wilful silence: “It indicated that her husband didn’t know the truth. That he didn’t understand her at all” (Divakaruni, 131). When she questioned her why did she accept her fate when she had not violated the dictates of dharma; her reply had shaken the very soul of Sita: “When you put your hand into fire, knowingly or unknowingly, do you not get burned? Such is the ancient law of the universe. Of Karma and its fruit. The idea of motive is irrelevant to it” (Divakaruni, 134). This part of Ahalya has made her uneasy, with a sense that justice was unpaid to Ahalya. In her dream, she again has seen the couple; Gautam asking forgiveness, but Ahalya turned her face away, perhaps to punish him the rest of her life by never speaking to him again so that he would always remember the trouble he has caused her, which the all-conquering love or the all-devouring time could never fully heal again. Sita then narrates the dejected story of Kaamrupini or Surpanakha, the asura princess who came to offer herself to Ram, but when Ram announces that he has already vowed not to take other wives, she offered herself to Lakshman, who made fun with her. Out of rage, she got violent over Sita; Lakshman came to her rescue and cut her nose and ears, who eyed them with disbelief because she could not accept that someone she offered pure love, could humiliate her in such a way. Her final words are indeed awe-inspiring: “You’ll be sorry. Ah, you’ll be sorry. All of you. My brothers shall know of this—and then you will be sorry you were ever born” (Divakaruni,150). Therein begins the countdown of their doom, to be more specific, the catastrophe of the entire narrative.

Ravan, the mischievous villain of *Ramayan*, therefore, has been projected in Divakaruni’s *Sitayana* as a caring brother who avenged on Ram for the pain he caused his sister, Surpankha. Despite his fascination for Sita, he never tried to violate her modesty; rather, he introduced her to Mandodari, his chief queen, the wisest woman of his life. The woman tried to make her believe that she was her lost

daughter whom they had to throw away as it was prophesied that she would be the dire cause of the death of her entire lineage. Mandodari, therefore, could not elucidate this truth to her husband, who was infatuated beyond reasons with a woman who might be his own daughter. Oscillated between dilemma and inertia, guilt and grief, she finds herself at a loss guessing the destiny Sita's curse would lead them to. Ravan, though defeated all the gods and the sages, was not altogether invincible; the two species, men and monkey, had the power to bring about his catastrophe. The battle was a fearsome one, Vibheeshan's son who fought courageously and even wounded Ram, died sorrowfully by Brahmastra, and this secret was conveyed by none other than his own father. Sita felt bad for Sarama, the bereaved mother, as she contemplates, "Even if Ram won the war and Vibheeshan was made king of Lanka and she the queen, Sarama would never forgive her husband for this betrayal" (Divakaruni,223). He also caused the death of Ravan's dearest son, Indrajit, at the time of performing the Nikumbhila yajna; though he fought bravely, he was unprepared and defenceless, and Lakshman killed him easily. When Ravan was on the verge of death, he was repentant for causing distress to Mandodari all through her life, even he took her son away from her, and Mandodari finally revealed the mystery she was hiding so far; that Sita was their lost daughter; though Ravan did not believe in her explanation; he saw an epiphany of Vaikuntha, Vishnu was there reclining upon the great serpent Seshnaag with the familiar face of Ram himself; and at his feet, there was Lakshmi, who was none other than Sita herself. Ravan was the loyal gate-keeper of Vishnu, Jaya. Vishnu told him he needed rest and not to disturb him during his rest time. But some children, especially the sons of Sanatkumar, the devotees of Vishnu, came to visit him, and when they were debarred, they cursed him to live seven mortal lives on earth with all the pains and suffering like common humans away from Vishnu. When they were gone, Vishnu rose from his slumber and announced them to choose between seven earthly lives as devotees or three mortal lives with extreme hatred for the lord. Jaya chose the second one, and Vishnu promised him that each time he would come down to deliver him from his mortal torment. Goddess Lakshmi too decided to follow her lord, and with this final vision, Ravan peacefully died under the feet of Sita.

After the trauma was over, Sita was again dressed as the royal queen with heavy bangles and gold ornaments more like heavy chains she had grown unused for so long, but Ram announced with extreme impartiality as well as carelessness:

*It was my duty to rescue you . . . But I cannot take you back to Ayodhya with me. Ravanabducted you from my home. You've lived in his palace for a year now. Who knows what kind of relationship you've had with him– (Divakaruni, 242)*

Sita protested vehemently against such insinuation and willingly stepped into the fire to prove her innocence, and miraculously came out unharmed, unaffected, as glowing as before. Ram embraced her, assuring that she has proved herself above all suspicions and never would her character be questioned under any circumstances. But the same Ram was beguiled again, when Surpanakha, in the disguise of Shanta, had mysteriously made Sita draw a portrait of Ravan in her pregnancy and created the suspicion of an illicit affair in the psyche of Ram. Her plan worked exactly as decided, and Ram banished his pregnant wife to the hermitage of Sage Valmiki, and Sita had to accept her lot painfully. Even long after she had given birth to Luv and Kush, who performed Ramayana before their father, Ram willingly accepted his sons but arranged another fire-test for Sita. But that time, she decided not to yield to any of the whims of Ram; she had suffered, misjudged, misunderstood and

maltreated enough, and fearlessly declared her unwillingness to prove her innocence repeatedly before the public eye. She added he had already humiliated her unlawfully by sacrificing his private life for the public one, but there should always be a limit for accepting and enduring humiliation. He had never allowed her the opportunity to defend herself and unfairly sentenced his unborn children to a life of hardship or even death in the wilderness. She begged before the mother earth to shelter her from further humiliations; though Ram repeatedly tried to stop her, he could not pass the fire. She felt she was entering the celestial palace underground, the jewelled palace of Vishnu sparkling with all the colours of a rainbow. It was inviting her: “*Come, it is time. You have done your duty. You have suffered enough. It is time to return*” (Divakaruni, 358). She uttered her last words that long before she had forgiven him for all his wrongs, as she valued him more than her anger, rage and compunctions. Beauvoir has identified this image of the mother earth as an emblem of commotion, as the be-all and the end-all of oblivion: “Mother earth has a face of darkness: she is chaos, where everything comes from and must return one day; she is Nothingness” (Beauvoir, 170). Sita’s self-effacing end, therefore, was the most distinguished dissent humanity has ever witnessed, and it has made her immortal as the divine epitome of compassion and love, integrity and conscientiousness. Jasbir Jain, in her article entitled “Daughters of Mother India in Search of A Nation”, has remarkably pointed out that:

*The living presence of Sita myth is evident not only in the framing of woman as an ideal, virtuous ‘pativrata’, an image acknowledges by men and women alike even during the preparation period but also in the persisting image of ‘agnipariksha’ in our own times. (Jain, 1654)*

Nabaneeta Dev Sen, too, in her article “When Women Retell the Ramayan”, has rightly observed that:

*Just as the Ram myth has been exploited by the patriarchal Brahminical system to construct an ideal Hindu male, Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female, to help serve the system. The impact is far-reaching. Several years ago, Sally Sutherland showed that for 90 per cent of the Indians she interviewed, Sita was their favourite (mythical) woman. No one blesses a bride by saying,—Be like Draupadi. It is always Sita and Sabitri. They are the saviours. Sabitri saved her husband from death, Sita saved him from disgrace. Although Sita’s life can hardly be called a happy one, she remains the ideal woman through whom the patriarchal values may be spread far and wide and through whom women may be taught to bear all injustice silently. (Dev Sen, 19)*

### **Conclusion:**

So, *Ramayan* is a tale which we have grown with; the epic nuances of Ram’s generousness or his idealism, his unending effort of rescuing Sita, the fraternal bond between brothers and the devotedness of Sita as the emblem of virtue and loyalty. But we pay lesser regard to those hyphenated, fractured psyche of those unnoticed or neglected females and their continuous struggle to maintain their individuality. *Sitayana* is no doubt a masterpiece of Divakaruni because instead of presenting a female-oriented discourse, she has described both the parties with their own versions of dilemma and obligations. She has not even tried to offer an altered destination to Sita’s perilous journey; nor does she paint a negative image of Ram as a dominating or tyrant husband; she paints her canvas of *Sitayana* with those references which were already there in the original epic, but somehow deemed under the halo of patriarchal glory. Mythological discourses are generally seen to

be male-centred, where the majestic heroes rescue their queens or princesses after long battles and bloodshed. But, females are rarely seen fighting in battles to rescue their lost glories. Divakaruni, both in *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, has tried to re-mould, re-tell and re-fabricate those mythical narratives to distraught the set pattern of hierarchy as well as to figure out the muted protests against marginalisation, otherisation and the insignificant subject-position of this peripheral sex. We can finally conclude with the affirmation of Dr. Sukanya Saha, Assistant Professor in the department of English and Foreign Languages at SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, Tamilnadu:

*Sita's life oscillates between two extremes, royalty and wilderness, emanating many-hued emotions and impulses. Sitayan is emergence of an independent voice, unabashed of social inhibitions, voicing a modest protest which never turns into a tirade. Banerjee chose her parameters and drew her margins in a calculated manner. Sita is an emancipated woman who is moored to filial commitments. Her plight in this mortal plane has left many questions unresolved and would serve as an intense point of contention. (Saha, 05)*

Thus, Divakaruni's ingenuity lies in presenting the impossible with a feasible paradigmatic theorem while estranging some of the general commonalities with impeccable grandiloquence. Through these pungent allusions, myths, and allegorical symbols, Divakaruni's *Sitayana* attains the inextinguishable magnitude of mirroring the affliction of spiritual exuberance.

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